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ABSTRACT

Unsafe conditions in schools impede student learning. This paper describes how an effective conflict-management program can help to create a safe school environment. Such a program should be considered essential to an overall school-safety plan, not regarded as an adjunct to the plan. An effective conflict-management program gives students a feeling of true ownership; utilizes a proactive approach based on a shared vision; and focuses on the problem, rather than a person's character. The program relies on student input, which can take the form of student-run courts, and promotes school pride, which can be developed through an orientation program. Five keys for establishing a conflict-management program are: (1) procure faculty support and involvement; (2) select student leaders from all groups to serve as conflict managers; (3) provide comprehensive, hands-on training; (4) conduct regular supervision and evaluation; and (5) designate a dynamic and public-relations-oriented director. Common obstacles include a lack of respect, the abuse of class time, and the lack of adequate supervision. Steps in initiating a conflict-management program include conducting a needs-assessment survey, a faculty presentation, training, school education, and an opening day. (LMI)

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CONFLICT MANAGEMENT--SETTING THE TONE FOR SCHOOL SAFETY

(presented January 23, 1995 at CLMS/CLHS Winter Symposium
by James Cook, P.O. Box 3212, San Leandro, CA 94578)
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Parents, students, teachers, administrators and local communities in general are gravely concerned about school safety issues. For little learning can occur when a student's primary concern is for his/her own personal safety and laughter in the halls is replaced by the anxious stench of cold sweat. Students often choose not to positively participate, fearful of breaking the silent yet expected norm of defiant inadequacy.

Conflict Management programs began to be implemented at school sites in the 1980's and have contributed significantly to maintaining a safer school environment. Some districts are even mandating that every student be trained in conflict resolution techniques. However, most programs are perceived as <u>adjunct</u> in nature, ie. not <u>essential</u>.

My goal in the next 45 minutes to an hour is to convince you or at least have you consider moving Conflict Management from its supporting position to a prominent leading role in a school's overall safety plan. We will begin this dialogue by examining the fundamentals of a safe school environment. I will then demonstrate how effective Conflict Management programs can help to maintain or create such an environment. Finally, I will highlight what I consider to be the important keys for establishing a Conflict Management programs at a school site.

Cornerstones For Building A Safe School Environment

One of the most over-used yet under utilized ideas in schools is the concept of "Buy-in" or "Ownership". It is based on the premise that thieves don't rob their own houses (they may not clean their rooms, yet they won't vandalize the kitchen). However many administrators are only able to give lip service to "ownership" as the burden of being school climate enforcers often mandates quick actions without time for community input or feedback. School violations and crises situations often transpire suddenly without warning.

True ownership is possible only when the administrator's focus changes from "climate enforcers" to "climate protectors or creators." Instead of guarding the new white living room rug from muddy imprints one may develop a policy where shoes are taken off at the doorway upon entrance. The emphasis subtly shifts from reactive to proactive, where the vision pursued is one emanating from parents, students, teachers, and administrators--my experience being that these different perspectives offer a very similar school ideal where learning and safety are expected. Administrators become empowered to be "keepers of the vision" rather than harried disciplinarian outcasts.

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The administration must also be willing to give up some power and responsibility to students. Student input and critique becomes a necessary and essential component of school committees. For example, a campus mural could be designed and produced by students with a group of teachers, parents, and students approving the final draft. The administrator's role again undergoes a slight yet profound adjustment, from police person to coach, mentor and guide as increased freedom and responsibility demand thorough and supportive monitoring. Students must be held accountable for their choices and guided by an adult's experience and expertise.

An elementary school with a yearly turnover rate of approximately 30% set up a "Friendship Program" to greet and help acclimate new students. Sixth grade students were trained in phone etiquette, communication skills and school rules. A new student, grades 4-6, would be called the night before starting school to set up a meeting place before school on the next day. The new student would be shown around campus, introduced to school personalities (teachers,principle,A.P.,yard supervisor...) and personal interest groups (4-square/T-ball/B-ball players, double dutch enthusiasts, music and art students). School rules and culture were also discussed and the student was given a simple student produced handbook on "the basic rules" and what it means to be an "Edendale" student. "Friendship Program" members would check the office every day to see if any new students were going to be admitted. The program, once established was almost entirely student run. Weekly check-ins by the counselor to monitor and fine-tune the program were the only adult supervisory contacts. The "Friendship Program" was highly acclaimed for contributing to a positive school climate and was periodically visited by other schools seeking successful intervention strategies.

Student run courts can also be a powerful agent for empowering student responsibility and leadership, for I truly believe that students desire to be viewed as competent, valuable, contributing individuals...even the most troublesome--I was once setting up a conflict manager program at an elementary school. I generally train those students selected by their peers to be conflict managers and do not use a list of candidates which some teachers and principles provide. I want <u>student choices</u> for that equals ownership. Anyway, one of the potential managers was a trouble-maker extraordinaire. I wanted to give him a chance , yet was compelled to kick him out after a few hours of training. The next day, he came to me and asked and then pleaded for reinstatement on the team. After a discussion, I agreed to give him another chance if he would write an essay on why he would be an excellent conflict manager. Shortly thereafter I was speaking with his English teacher who chuckled at my assignment, since he hadn't turned in an English paper the whole quarter. The next day he brought me a two page essay with only a few grammatical errors. He returned to the training, wasn't a problem behaviorally, and became a good conflict manager. He had found something that could give him positive meaning to his existence and was willing to work for it.

School pride is another invaluable cornerstone for constructing and maintaining a safe school ambiance. School pride is more than just rallies or related solely to athletics--an

association which renders it to a transitory and erratic fate at best and leaves out two thirds of the student body. School pride has the potential to be an elemental part of every day school demeanor. It can be lived in different ways by diverse people, each contributing to the overall school culture.

An Orientation Program can introduce new students to the possibilities and expectations which define a specific school. This "education" should ideally be done by students for students. A true re-structuring of the school from the ground upwards may occur as each individual student and his/her parents seek to have their questions answered and their unique needs met. New courses, clubs, and programs such as free tutoring and community service may emerge as the school's community gives voice to its hopes and dreams and is listened to by site personnel. Parents may even volunteer more to ensure that "their" school provides their children with the opportunity to a quality and character building education.

School pride, however must be nourished by ownership. Otherwise its spirit wanes and it becomes only vapid background music for another's game.

Conflict Management's Contributions To A Safe Climate

Once an effective conflict management program is established and utilized by a school's population, festering tensions rarely build up and explode unexpectedly as students realize that they can go someplace to seek a fair resolution of a personal conflict without violence--a safe area where anger can be vented within a prescribed format and one is respected and listened to no matter what their perspective is on the conflict.

The process is one of self-empowerment as students solve problems without direct adult assistance. Reframing conflict as an opportunity to learn or draw nearer to the "truth" imbues the school environment with optimistic energy and drive--We can work together to solve our problems! Students are able "to change" with honor as the focus stays on <u>the problem</u> and not on a <u>person's character or inadequacies</u>. Teachers modeling listening skills add to an environment where personal respect is lived daily.

A detective mentality is engendered and critical thinking fostered as pragmatic and creative solutions are found to seemingly unsolvable problems. One of my favorite stories illustrating this point is from William Ury's book, <u>Getting Past No.</u>(p.159)

> --There is a story of a man who left seventeen camels to his three sons. He left half the camels to his eldest son, a third to his middle son, and a ninth to his youngest. The three set to dividing up their inheritance but soon despaired of their ability to negotiate a solution--because seventeen could not be divided by two or three or nine. The sons approached a wise old woman. After pondering the problem, the old woman said,"See what happens if you take my camel." So then the sons had eighteen camels. The eldest son took his half--that was nine. The middle son took his third--that was six. And the youngest son took his ninth--that was two. Nine

and six and two make seventeen. They had one camel left over. They gave it back to the wise old woman.--

One possible indirect result of conflict management is a re-seeding of democratic principles as debate and careful analysis become integral components of a school's daily routine.

Five Keys For Establishing A Conflict Management Program

Simply stated, a conflict management program will not work unless it is integrated into the fundamental school structure. Some programs initiated by a few vigorous staff tend to be isolated and are like a neglected tree growing in the school garden thirsting for water. No one knows why its there or is concerned about its welfare, although it provides shade for all. Eventually it is cut down as part of a "beautification movement" or simply for chimney logs. Only then do garden visitors realize how much they miss it. With this cautionary tale in mind, let's describe the basic components needed for success.

1.Faculty Support/Involvement--Faculty must be educated about the benefits of conflict management programs. However, before benefits are detailed one must address the personal costs to each member(time, new routines, paperwork). Fortunately costs are quite minimal or for some non-existent. Faculty can choose to participate but must not be compelled to be active advocates. Sometimes it is necessary to utilize veterans and "oldtimers" as consultants for the logistics of the program. This is a form of indirect ownership and will cut down or prevent negative faculty room comments as "important players" have been given the opportunity to offer their individual input. Presenters must prepare themselves well before bring a conflict management proposal before faculty. It is important to have visited schools with programs and to arm themselves with hands-on information and anecdotal stories. Passion may help to sustain the process yet faculty overwhelmingly want to know "the facts." Give them the honest facts and they will lend their support or at least not become an obstacle in the way.

2.Selection Process--It is extremely important to get as many student leaders, as perceived by their peers, to be conflict managers. When this occurs, the program automatically gains respect and trust from the general student body. It may be necessary to go into classrooms, talk to coaches,observe lunchroom "hierarchies", and interview specific candidates to achieve this goal. Boys may need to be actively recruited in an effort to balance the male:female ratio among conflict managers.

3.Thorough Hands-On Training--A training program which provides ample time for practicing the techniques and process of conflict management as well as allowing time for pertinent, refining feedback is necessary to ensure a confident core of conflict managers. This training should emphasis the creating and

holding of a "safe space" for resolving conflicts and stress the development of a supportive, sensitive, firm, inquiring conflict management mentality which is problem, not person oriented and specific rather than general in nature--one that is not seeking fault but only a mutually satisfying resolution.

4.Regular Supervision and Evaluation--Many conflict management programs start off with the speed and grace of a nimble rabbit yet stumble and fall as the weeks pass. A program requires consistent monitoring and supervision to complete the race and survive the year. Most programs that fail, fail because of this missing factor. It is necessary to document every case, detailing the resolution and having each participant sign indicating agreement. If no resolution is reached, this too must be indicated. Such filed documentation is valuable information for the program and can be an excellent data resource when one is practicing public relations. Weekly or bi-weekly meetings with all conflict managers are necessary to ensure quality facilitation, deal expediently with problem situations, and to boost morale. Students are able to exchange ideas, learn from one another and stay focused on the job if they know that they may called upon to present a case.

5.Director/Coordinator--The Director or Coordinator is the symbolic representative and guiding hand of the program. A dynamic personality with the flair of an artist, skill of a craftsman, and care of a gardener are needed to keep the program running effectively. Conflict Management is not just another school program. It can be the fundamental intervention addressing school safety. The director, cognizant of this, utilizes public relation opportunities to share success stories and current data on the program and its impact on the school community.(the number of referrals, suspensions for fighting,conflict management school use surveys) It is best to have one person act as the Director or Coordinator with full responsibility for the program. Otherwise shared leadership often results in a loss of personal ownership and satisfaction with mediocrity. Besides, it is easier for school staff to direct their questions and comments to one person.

There are three basic challenges to having a successful conflict management program, all of which can be easily remedied. The first major challenge is lack of utilization and/or lack of respect for the program and conflict managers. If student leaders from all groups are recruited, respect for the program becomes a non-issue. Full utilization can only be assured if administrators and teachers buy into the referral process. In many schools, the assistant principals are the key players as they are the source of referrals. If at all possible involve them in the training, so that they can experience first hand the merits of the program and will therefore be willing and confident of delegating most conflict situations to conflict managers.

The second challenge is "class time abuse." An efficient program has sufficient conflict managers and rotates them in response to referred cases thereby ensuring that conflict managers do not miss excessive class time. A limit of 45 minutes to resolve

a conflict and the subsequent case paperwork will curtail situations where "friends" misuse the system to skip class. A prevailing view among conflict managers that time is precious and that the reputation of the program is at stake each and every referral will also help to eliminate dubious conflict situations.

The third challenge is the previously mentioned lack of consistent monitoring, supervision and record keeping. If a school is to initiate a conflict management program, it must be willing not only "to birth" the program but to nourish it as it develops during its lifetime. If the school's community does not have this energy and commitment, then it is best to wait, for there is nothing more damaging to the reputation of conflict management and more intrinsically dissatisfying than a job half done.

Setting Up A Program

The first step in beginning a conflict management program is to survey the students and staff. Questions such as,...what kind of conflicts occur at this school?, where and when do these problems take place?, and who in your class do you think would make a good conflict manager?, help to clarify and delineate specific perceived school problems, determine potential conflict managers and begin the process of school ownership. A brief introduction to classes before the survey, which describes what a conflict manager does, that your school is thinking about starting such a program and needs student input before making a decision, will help to increase the validity and depth of the survey.

The second step is a faculty presentation which may take place in two parts--a brief introduction before the school survey and a more comprehensive follow-up where survey results are shared and logistical procedures (where conflict management will occur, the referral process, hall passes, record keeping protocol, monitoring component,...) are outlined. It is extremely important to be well prepared and knowledgeable, anticipating difficult questions and being open to input, especially from veterans, which may fine tune the program and thereby give the faculty a sense of some control and ownership.

The third step is the actual training preceded by a letter sent home to potential conflict management candidates congratulating them on their selection. This "honored" status can be used externally as a means to re-focus energy during the training and internally as an aid to fostering commitment to mastering the skills of a conflict manager.(ie."I was chosen to be a conflict manager because my peers thought I would do a good job) Day long trainings are the preferred training model. This concentrated approach grants students the opportunity to practice and know thoroughly the conflict management process and avoids wasted time reviewing what happened the day or week before. It also sends a strong message to the school community that conflict management is an important new addition which warrants such a commitment of time and energy.

The fourth step is educating the school. Classroom presentations with skits demonstrating conflict managers facilitating a possible resolution to a real life problem are an

ideal method for introducing the program. This hands-on style can even be used at middle schools and high schools by combining two or possibly three classes. Assemblies, however are not an effective educational tool. They are generally too large and impersonal to create the personal identification needed to sustain interest. Bulletin boards with photos of conflict managers and articles in the school newspaper, PTA news letter, principal's letter, etc. are excellent supplementary ways of presenting and keeping conflict management alive in the community's consciousness.

The fifth and final step of setting up is opening day. On elementary campuses it is time to be out in force, clearly marked (wind breakers, arm bands, T-shirts, hats, clip boards) and ready for action. At middle and high schools, opening day can be announced over the PA system with a reminder of how referrals are made. Generally programs start off slow and build up momentum with time, so one shouldn't be disappointed by a slow first couple of days or weeks. If this trend continues, one must examine and review the referral system, how conflict management was introduced to the school, and faculty attitudes toward the program in an effort to pinpoint "the wrench in the system" and remove it. However, if the first four steps have been completed successfully, there will be no shortage of cases. It is important to have the best conflict managers take the first few cases--the reputation of the program is at stake. If this initial "testing" is completed satisfactorily your conflict management will continue to grow and truly begin to "set the tone for safety" at your school site.